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ABSTRACT

Although the existence of small Catholic elementary schools (enrollment: 300 or less) is precarious, these institutions enable students to succeed academically beyond national norms, due to the special learning environment that they provide. The recent Small Schools Survey of Catholic elementary schools indicated that classes in small Catholic schools scored exceptionally well in all of the basic learning areas: reading, mathematics, reference skills. This achievement has important implications for the viability of other very small schools, be they private, religious, or public, and supports other educational research showing that size alone does not indicate the quality of a school. Principals whose small Catholic elementary schools modeled above average academic achievement reported that the academic advantages of small schools due to low teacher-to-pupil ratios included: use of more varied materials and tasks, higher levels of thinking due to more demanding assignments, increased opportunities for participation, formulation of better study habits, community support and greater opportunities for leadership. Team concept, priorities, skill organization, planning for content subjects, an interdisciplinary approach, and instructional assistance were cited as effective elements in school-wide organization, and knowledge of key concepts and skills, individualization, and room arrangement contributed to effective teaching. Reasons for school failures and ideas for generating support are included. (JMM)

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ERIC DIGEST

SMALL SCHOOLS DIGEST

EDO-RC-88-06

Small Catholic Elementary Schools: An Endangered Species?

Small Catholic schools are usually very small and their very existence remains precarious. Those who would close such schools, however, should recognize that these institutions provide experiences to students which enable them to succeed academically at a level beyond national norms. That achievement occurs within a special learning environment, one which has important implications for the viability of other very small schools—be they private, religious, or public.

What is a "small" Catholic School?

The enrollment figure most commonly accepted to identify small elementary schools is 300 or less (Barker, 1986). When considering Catholic elementary schools, however, that definition of "smallness" is not useful because the "under 300" category would include about 69 percent Catholic elementary schools in the United States. The average size of the 7,790 Catholic elementary schools is 260 students (National Catholic Educational Association [NCEA], 1987).

In practical terms, a Catholic school becomes "small" when the standard "one-grade-per-room" organization shifts to the multi-grade classroom; i.e., students in two or more grades share the same instructional setting.

With the current 21:1 student/teacher ratio in Catholic elementary schools (NCEA, 1987), the K-8 or 1-8 school of 150 can still maintain one-grade-per-room and approach that average student/teacher ratio. When a school drops to 100, however, and still uses one-grade-per-room, the resulting student/teacher ratio is 11:1 or 12:1, which almost doubles personnel costs and pushes the school beyond financial limits. To be financially viable, a school under 100 must recognize its smallness and seek structures and methods appropriate to its size.

Where are the "small" Catholic schools?

A recent Small Schools Survey (Reck, forthcoming) found that 462 Catholic elementary schools in the United States enrolled fewer that 100 students in 8-grade schools or the equivalent (viz., fewer that 12.5 students per grade in schools with fewer than 8 grades). Over three-fourths of these schools are located in only 13 states: Wisconsin (55), Missouri (40), Pennsylvania (34), Illinois (33), Michigan (28), New York (26), Kentucky (25), Nebraska (23), Minnesota (22), Ohio (19), Kansas (18), Indiana (16), and Iowa (13).

Why are these schools endangered?

Many persons still remember the argument for public school consolidation in the 1950's and 1960's: "bigger is better." Recent educational research shows, on the contrary, that size by itself does not indicate the quality of a school (Marshall, 1984) and that *small schools can and do achieve as well* (Alberta Department of Education, 1984; Sher & Tompkins, 1977; Eberts, 1984; ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management 1982).

Unfortunately, many parents—and even some educators—are not aware of these recent findings and doubt the quality of the small school—especially when two or more grades are combined in the same classroom. Greater awareness of current research is needed.

How do these small Catholic schools score on standardized achievement tests?

The Small Schools Survey of Catholic elementary schools (Reck, forthcoming) indicates that 94% of the composite class averages (144 of the 153 reported) are on or above grade level. Moreover, the median class average on the composite achievement score increases through the grades-- with the eighth grade composite score 1.8 years above the national norm. In other words, the longer a class studies in a small Catholic school, the higher the group tends to score above the expected level.

The greater-than-expected achievement is also evident in the subtest to measure reading, with 92% of the reading class averages (418 of the 456 reported) on or above grade level. Again the median class average increases through the grades with the eighth grade reading 1.8 years above the national norm.

Reference skills score even higher with 98% of the class averages in this subtest (79 of 82 reported) on or above the grade level. The median class averages range from 1.5 to 2.0 grades above the national norm.

Mathematics results are also significantly above expected norms with 87% of the mathematics class averages (340 of the 389 reported) on or above grade level. The median class averages range from .4 grade above the norm in the primary to 1.8 grades above expected scoring in the eighth grade.

Thus, classes in small Catholic schools score exceptionally well in all of the basic learning areas. Although these classes are demographically distinctive in some respects, most notably by the absence of students with moderate to severe handicapping conditions, they nevertheless do include a broad spectrum of ability levels. When compared with students in larger Catholic schools (which average 1 to 2 years above national norms), the smaller school students get a slower start—perhaps because of the more limited educational opportunities in rural areas—then gradually match or surpass their peers.

What academic advantages do the small schools offer which help to explain such results?

Following the Small Schools Survey, Project Co-Directors Suzanne Hall and Carleen Reck conducted five regional meetings with principals who had responded to the survey and whose schools featured above-average academic achievement. The sites of the meetings (Shepard, Michigan; St. Mary's and Fulton, Missouri; Greensburg, Pennsylvania; and Holland, Wisconsin) approximated the location of most small Catholic schools. The total of 47 principals, representing over a thousand years' experience in small Catholic schools, consistently gave examples of the following academic advantages:

- Varied materials and tasks

Because fewer students are working on the same learning objective, they have more access to the available variety of multi-sensory materials. The manipulatives, for example, that would ordinarily be shared by 20 classmates are divided among only a fraction as many classmates. The longer time available for students work (while the teacher directly instructs the other grades) presses the teacher to find a variety of learning materials and tasks which will keep the students actively involved for these longer work periods.

- High levels of thinking

In higher-level thinking, the questions generally are short and the answers are long—a perfect combination for the teacher with a small number of students (and papers) at one level. According to the Small School Study participants, a higher-than-average percentage of teachers in multi-grade situations assign tasks that are open-ended rather that simple "fill-in-the-blank" worksheets. Their assignments tend to push students beyond factual knowledge to higher levels of thinking and beyond the textbook to a variety of reference materials.

Teachers in any situation *can* provide this type of classroom work. Those who are forced to find time-consuming and attention-holding assignments in the multi-grade classroom, however, more often *do* provide the kind of work that promotes higher levels of thinking.

- Opportunities for participation

Although large schools may offer a broader spectrum of mini-courses and educational activities, the chance for students to participate in these activities decreases as the school size increases. In the small school, students have greater opportunities to participate in the coveted computer course or the woodworking or quilting mini-course.

- Study habits

In multi-grade situations, students must work without direct teacher assistance for a significant part of the school day. As a result, students have more frequent opportunities to follow directions, to complete a task by themselves, to work for sustained periods without interruptions. These students are more likely to develop the ability to concentrate and to work independently; moreover, they have regular opportunities to learn that they are able to meet challenges if they keep working—clearly an academic advantage.

What other advantages are common to these small schools?

Participants in the Small Schools Study regional sessions were unanimous about two other advantages:

- Community support

In an era when youngsters often lack the support of two parents, students in the small school are each known by name, the setting tends to be less formal and more personalized, youngsters of different ages can associate with each other without seeming out of place, and children are at ease talking with adults. In the Catholic school which emphasizes the building of faith community, the total group can more easily participate together in prayer and liturgical expressions of faith and in community-building activities.

- Opportunities for leadership

The fact that a similar number of leadership positions and responsibilities await fewer students means that these students have more opportunities to develop leadership and personal maturity. In many small schools, for example, students teach each other computer skills and serve as trouble shooters—tasks often relegated to an aide in a larger setting.

What organizational strategies are most effective in facilitating student and teacher success?

According to the small school principals in the regional sessions, these elements are most effective—and essential:

- Team concept

Although the teaching principal remains the visible leader in the community, he or she will necessarily share many administrative tasks with the teachers. For this to work, the prinicipal should hold frequent brief sessions with all teachers (e.g., for 5 minutes every morning) to keep everyone involved and informed.

- Priorities

When setting school goals, much emphasis should be placed on skills needed in multi-grade settings; e.g., on reading and study skills.

- School-wide skill organization

For a teacher to keep track of one grade's objectives in all skill subjects is sufficient challenge. When two or three grades' objectives are included in the task, some clear system of recording basic skills (preferably school-wide) can assure that each student is progressing steadily in areas such as reading, mathematics, and language arts. This system can suggest the best groupings—often across grades—for instruction in skill areas.

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• Plan for content subjects

School-wide planning can shape 2 or 3 year cycles for content areas such as religion, social studies, science, music, and art. With such a plan, each classroom treats certain key areas each year—with expectations adjusted to student experience; e.g., Science Year 1: rocks, minerals, magnetism, space, solar system, climate; Year 2: forces (gravity, friction, energy, weather, etc.), sound, light, acids; Year 3: water, air, land forms, plants, animals, health. By the final grade, each student has met all key areas in each subject.

• Interdisciplinary approach

With less direct instructional time, teachers in these schools tend to use their instructional time for dual purposes more than the typical teacher— using literature to teach American history, art to learn religious symbols, graphs to introduce scientific information, etc.

• Instructional assistance

To supplement the limited teacher/student time, school-wide plans should include at least one means of instructional assistance; e.g., peer tutoring, collegiate or senior volunteer aides, self-correcting learning materials, computer-assisted instruction, video presentations, etc.

What contributes most to effective classroom teaching in these small schools?

The principals participating in the regional meeting reached agreement on the importance of the following for teachers in small schools:

• Knowledge of key concepts and skills

Because teachers in multi-grade classrooms have less direct instructional time, the most effective teachers know well the most important concepts and skills in each subject area. They concentrate on these with each student, then move toward secondary learnings, and finally provide enrichment.

• Individualization

The small school may have 8-10 students within the same grade—often the number within one homogeneous group in a larger school. Because the span of abilities can be vast within those eight to ten students, the effective teacher is open to form groupings as needed—across grade levels when suitable—and is adept at tailoring lessons, methodology, and assignments to keep the work within the grasp of one student while challenging another.

• Room arrangement

The multi-grade classroom—to be supportive—needs special attention:

- The teacher of the multigrade classroom deals with more levels and can little afford time to repeat assignments, so that the room needs assignment boards or pockets to help groups and/or individual students stay on task with little direct teacher guidance.
- Because students in the multi-grade room spend more time learning on their own, some system for student correction of daily work will allow the rapid feedback necessary for learning during practice; e.g., available answer keys or assigned student correctors. A place for correcting work—separate from completing work—can assist this process.
- The teaching station(s) should allow the teacher to observe all areas of the room, to occasionally walk around observing all student work—while still maintaining contact with the focal group.
- Because the teacher—working with another grade—cannot acknowledge each completed assignment, the room needs charts or another system for indicating completed tasks—especially those which do not produce paper results—and some collection baskets to give the student a sense of completion and the teacher an opportunity for perusal.
- This setting allows young extroverts to use their preferred learning styles during part of their long work periods. The classroom needs areas where pairs or small groups can work without disturbing others—all within view of the teacher.

How can the small Catholic school generate more support?

The fact that the small Catholic school tends to be located within the small town can be a genuine asset. Word spreads quickly there. Some steps to help save this endangered species, then, are these:

• sharing simple but clear evidence that "small" has many advantages over "big" in schooling—bolstered with concrete evidence of excellence in the specific school;
• planning ways in which the school can become the educational opportunity center for the parishioners and other supporters—e.g., through sharing the computer center, offering preschool or extended care, etc.;
• offering service to local worthy causes to persons in need;
• constantly communicating about student learning and achievement;
• providing regular, clear statements of costs and specific needs.

Why do small Catholic schools fail?

Some schools have not survived the 3-year duration of this study. Where information is available, the demise of these schools strengthens the points found in the Small Schools Study. The closed schools fit one or more of the following:

- They avoided multi-grade classrooms, thereby requiring a below-average student/teacher ratio and an above-average per-student cost which exceeded available finances.
- They had not organized or taught in ways that capitalize on the potential of the small school.
- They lacked strong leaders (the principal, the pastor of the sponsoring chruch, and/or the diocesan education staff) who believed in the advantages of the small Catholic school.
- They did not communicate clearly the advantages and the achievements of the small Catholic school.

The attention drawn to an endangered species can elicit greater appreciation and support. The attention focused in this decade on the endangered bald eagle, for example, has contributed to its re-emergence. An awareness of the endangered status of the small Catholic school—as well as its advantages, achievements, and methods for effective operation—can also save it from the threat of extinction.

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Wisconsin	55	Kentucky	25
Missouri	40	Nebraska	23
Pennsylvania	34	Minnesota	22
Illinois	33	Ohio	19
Michigan	28	Kansas	18
New York	26	Indiana	16
		Iowa	13

Why are these schools endangered?

Many persons still remember the argument for public school consolidation in the 1950's and 1960's: "bigger is better." Recent educational research shows, on the contrary, that size by itself does not indicate the quality of a school (Marshall, 1984) and that <u>small schools can and do achieve as well</u> (Alberta Department of Education, 1984; Sher & Tompkins, 1977; Eberts, 1984; ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1982).

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Table 1—CLASS COMPOSITE ACHIEVEMENT SCORES IN SMALL CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

	% of Class Averages On/Above Grade Level	Median Class Average in Years G.E. +/- Norm
Grade 1	100%	+ .4
Grade 2	95%	+ .4
Grade 3	88%	+ .6
Grade 4	96%	+ .6
Grade 5	96%	+ 1.1
Grade 6	95%	+ 1.1
Grade 7	94%	+ 1.6
Grade 8	93%	+ 1.8

The greater-than-expected achievement is also evident in the subtest to measure reading, with 92% of the reading class averages (418 of the 456 reported) on or above grade level. Again the median class average

increases through the grades with the eighth grade composite score 1.8 years above the national norm. See Table 2.

Table 2—CLASS AVERAGE OF READING SCORES IN SMALL CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

	% of Class Averages On/Above Grade Level	Median Class Average in Years G.E. +/- Norm
Grade 1	86%	+ .4
Grade 2	89%	+ .5
Grade 3	90%	+ .6
Grade 4	96%	+ 1.1
Grade 5	94%	+ 1.1
Grade 6	94%	+ 1.2
Grade 7	91%	+ 1.8
Grade 8	93%	+ 1.8

Reference skills score even higher with 96% of the class averages in this subtest (79 of 82 reported) on or above the grade level. The median class averages range from 1.5 to 2.0 grades above the national norm. See Table 3.

Table 3—CLASS AVERAGE OF REFERENCE SKILLS SCORES IN SMALL CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

	% of Class Averages On/Above Grade Level	Median Class Average In years G.E. +/- Norm
Grade 5	96%	+ 2.0
Grade 6	96%	+ 1.5

Grade 7	100%	+ 1.7
Grade 8	94%	+ 2.0

Mathematics results are also significantly above expected norms with 87% of the mathematics class averages (340 of the 389 reported) on or above grade level. The median class averages range from .4 grade above the norm in the primary to 1.8 grades above expected scoring in the eighth grade. See Table 4.

Table 4—CLASS AVERAGE OF MATHEMATICS SCORES IN SMALL CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

	% of Class Averages On/Above Grade Level	Median Class Average in Years G.E. +/- Norm
Grade 1	86%	+ .4
Grade 2	76%	+ .4
Grade 3	83%	+ .6
Grade 4	90%	+ .6
Grade 5	93%	+ .8
Grade 6	87%	+ .7
Grade 7	92%	+ 1.6
Grade 8	94%	+ 1.8

The above tables show that classes in small Catholic schools score exceptionally well in all of the basic learning areas. Although these classes are demographically distinctive in some respects, most notably by the absence of students with moderate to severe handicapping conditions, they nevertheless do include a broad spectrum of ability levels. When compared with students in larger Catholic schools (which average 1 to 2 years above national norms), the smaller school students get a slower

start--perhaps because of the more limited educational opportunities in rural areas--then gradually match or surpass their peers.

What academic advantages do the small schools offer which help to explain such results?

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o Varied materials and tasks

Because fewer students are working on the same learning objective, they have more access to the available variety of multi-sensory materials. The manipulatives, for example, that would ordinarily be shared by twenty classmates are divided among only a fraction as many classmates. The longer time available for student work (while the teacher directly instructs the other grades) presses the teacher to find a variety of learning materials and tasks which will keep the students actively involved for these longer work periods.

o Higher levels of thinking

In higher-level thinking, the questions generally are short and the

answers are long--a perfect combination for the teacher with a small number of students (and papers) at one level. According to the Small School Study participants, a higher-than-average percentage of teachers in multi-grade situations assign tasks that are open-ended rather than simple "fill-in-the-blank" worksheets. Their assignments tend to push students beyond factual knowledge to higher levels of thinking and beyond the textbook to a variety of reference materials.

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o Opportunities for participation

Although large schools may offer a broader spectrum of mini-courses and educational activities, the chance for a student to participate in these activities decreases as the school size increases. In the small school, students have greater opportunities to participate in the coveted computer course or the woodworking or quilting mini-course.

o Study habits

In multi-grade situations, students must work without direct teacher assistance for a significant part of the school day. As a result, students have more frequent opportunities to follow directions, to complete a task by themselves, to work for sustained periods without interruptions. As a result, these students are more likely to develop the ability to concentrate and to work independently; moreover, they have regular opportunities to learn that they are able to meet challenges if

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What other advantages are common to these small schools?

Participants in the Small Schools Study regional sessions were unanimous about two other advantages:

o Community support

In an era when youngsters often lack the support of two parents, students in the small school find that each student is known by name, that the setting tends to be less formal and more personalized, that youngsters of different ages can associate with each other without seeming out of place, that children are at ease talking with adults. In the Catholic school which emphasizes the building of faith community, the total group can more easily participate together in prayer and liturgical expressions of faith and in community-building activities.

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Although the teaching principal remains the visible leader in the community, he or she will necessarily share many administrative tasks with the teachers. For this to work, the principal should hold frequent brief sessions with all teachers (e.g., for five minutes every morning) to keep everyone involved and informed.

o Priorities

When setting school goals, much emphasis should be placed on skills needed in multi-grade settings; e.g., on reading and study skills.

o School-wide skill organization

For a teacher to keep track of one grade's objectives in all skill subjects is sufficient challenge. When two or three grades' objectives are included in the task, some clear system of recording basic skills (preferably school-wide) can assure that each student is progressing steadily in areas such as reading, mathematics, and language arts. This system can suggest the best groupings--often across grades--for instruction in skill areas.

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School-wide planning can shape 2 or 3 year cycles for content areas such as religion, social studies, science, music, and art. With such a plan, each classroom treats certain key areas each year--with expectations adjusted to student experience; e.g., Science Year 1: rocks, minerals, magnetism, space, solar system, climate; Year 2: forces

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With less direct instructional time, teachers in these schools tend to use their instructional time for dual purposes more than the typical teacher--using literature to teach American history, art to learn religious symbols, graphs to introduce scientific information, etc.

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o Room arrangement

The multi-grade classroom--to be supportive--needs special attention:

- The teacher of the multi-grade classroom deals with more levels and can little afford time to repeat assignments, so the room needs assignment boards or pockets to help groups and/or individual students stay on task with little direct teacher guidance.
- Because students in the multi-grade room spend more time learning on their own, some system for student correction of daily work will allow the rapid feedback necessary for learning during practice; e.g., available answer keys or assigned student correctors. A place for correcting work--separate from completing work--can assist this process.
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Why do small Catholic schools fail?

Some schools have not survived the 3-year duration of this study. Where information is available, the demise of these schools strengthens the points found in the Small Schools Study. The closed schools fit one or more of the following:

- They avoided multi-grade classrooms, thereby requiring a below-average student/teacher ratio and an above-average per-student cost which exceeded available finances.
- They had not organized or taught in ways that capitalize on the potential of the small school.
- They lacked strong leaders (the principal, the pastor of the sponsoring church, and/or the diocesan education staff) who believed in the advantages of the small Catholic school.
- They did not communicate clearly the advantages and the achievements of the small Catholic school.

The attention drawn to an endangered species can elicit greater appreciation and support. The attention focused in this decade on the endangered bald eagle, for example, has contributed to its re-emergence. An awareness of the endangered status of the small Catholic school--as well as its advantages, achievements, and methods for effective operation--can also save it from the threat of extinction.

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